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ABSTRACT

The pressure to assess educational outcomes comes from a variety of national, regional, and state forces. The primary thrust of most current state initiatives is to encourage institutions to undertake their own appropriate local assessment efforts. The narrow view of assessment focuses upon the use of standardized tests to show the outcomes of learning, while the broader view suggests that effective assessment involves many measurement methods spaced over a period of time. The primary issue regarding the purpose of assessment seems to be: Is the student being tested or is the institution being tested? The favored purpose appears to be a formative one which gathers information on the quality of college programs in attaining broadly defined outcomes and promoting change to improve that quality. A secondary purpose appears to be the need to determine whether or not students have the abilities that their degrees are supposed to certify. Each speech communication department around the country will probably be faced with the assessment issue in one form or another. Administrtors and faculty members need: (1) a clear statement of anticipated outcomes; (2) to be actively involved in planning college assessment programs; and (3) to acquaint themselves with the various standardized measures which they might choose or which might be chosen for them. (Twenty-four references are attached.) (MG)

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ASSESSING THE OUTCOMES OF COLLEGE: IMPLICATIONS FOR SPEECH COMMUNICATION

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ASSESSING THE OUTCOMES OF COLLEGE: IMPLICATIONS FOR SPEECH COMMUNICATION

A hue and cry has gone up in the halls of state legislatures throughout the land "Assessment is the answer!!" Yes, but an answer to what? The questions vary from person to person and state to state. However, for many legislators interested in increasing the quality of education, assessment is the answer no matter how the question is phrased. Is this the wave of the future? Or, if we wait it out, will it go away? Should we dig in our heels and resist efforts by legislators and administrators to implement assessment programs? Probably not. Governors and legislators want a better educated, more competitive workforce. To get it, they want higher student and institutional performance, especially at the undergraduate level. In their view, a mandate to assess sends colleges a signal to get in gear (Marchese, 1987). This means that the measures of institutional quality are shifting, traditional gauges of quality--an institution's resources or its reputational ranking--appear to be of less value than contributions to student learning. Marchese and others believe the assessment issue is with us to stay.

This being the case, how should faculty and department heads in speech communication respond to this pressure? SCA's Committee on Assessment and Testing is developing a series of responses, including this article and others to follow, and a summer conference on assessment to be held in Denver during the summer of 1990. This article focuses on some basic questions regarding assessment in higher education that may be useful to administrators in speech communication facing pressures to develop an assessment program.

What is the impetus for the assessment movement?

The pressure to assess educational outcomes comes from a variety of national, regional, and state forces. Several national reports such as the AAC's "Integrity in the College Curriculum" along with the Department of Education under the leadership of William Bennet during the Reagan administration, called for greater accountability from colleges and universities in terms of student outcomes (Chandler, 1986). In fact, the Association of American College's report "Integrity in the Classroom" (1985) referred to

the absence of institutional accountability as one of the most "remarkable and scandalous aspects" of higher education. These sources seemed to suggest that assessment would help identify and eliminate the weaknesses in undergraduate education.

Regional accrediting agencies are beginning to stress more strongly the notion that colleges and universities must demonstrate that they are meeting their stated goals (Manning, 1986). While not advocating that it be a "primary component of the accreditation process," Thrash found in her two surveys of regional and selected national and specialized accrediting commissions that "accrediting agencies are already placing increased emphasis on an institution's ability to assess and document outcomes as a part of a larger pattern of results and achievements" (Thrash, 1988, p. 17).

Pressure for assessment has also come from the state level. The National Governors Association has a five year project in improving education. Part of this effort is a Task Force on College Quality (Smith, 1986). State leaders have a variety of options ranging from indirect incentives to legislative mandates which are used to require that colleges and universities fully assess the results of learning (McMahon, 1986).

The various sources of interest in assessment have generated a bewildering array of complex issues. The complexity of these issues has generated fears in some quarters of higher education that outside authorities will mis-use assessment information and that the drive for assessment may narrow curricula and homogenize instruction. Are these fears well-founded?

Where are we now?

In spite of the variety of mandates from a wide range of agencies, Ewell (1987) believes the primary thrust of most current state initiatives is to encourage institutions to undertake their own appropriate local assessment efforts. He also makes a point that many may not agree with on first reading. Ewell believes that mandates for assessment have largely been careful, deliberate, and mindful of the subtleties involved in educational assessment. Institutions are being allowed to initiate and develop their

own appropriate assessment programs (Ewell, 1987). That, clearly, is the ideal and Ewell seems to think it is being met.

There has also been a widespread retreat from so-called "rising junior" testing programs. These require individual students to demonstrate mastery of "college level skills" as a condition for advancement. To date, no state has followed Florida and Georgia along this path and at least three have considered and rejected such programs (Ewell, 1987). A primary problem with the rising junior approach is that students do not uniformly spend their freshman and sophomore years devoting their time to the general education courses. Most spread basic requirements out over the four years of their college experience. Thus, rising junior exams compare students with widely divergent sets of course work behind them.

States (for example, Washington) are establishing programs -- generally through their coordinating boards -- that will require institutions to report performance on a number of outcome criteria. Nothing is usually said about how such assessments are to be accomplished, institutions may select their own appropriate methods.
These statements by Ewell and others appear to give rise to some optimism that we can, given sufficient boldness, control our own destiny regarding our future in assessment.

What is meant meant by "assessment?"

Garfile and Corcoran (1986) noted that the term "assessment" seems to have both narrow and broad meanings. The narrow view focuses upon the use of standardized tests to show the outcomes of learning. This approach is close to what faculty would consider "normal" testing of course work. How much has the student learned? Have they met the objectives set for them?

The broader view suggests that effective assessment involves many measurement methods spaced over a period of time. The broader view is also less interested in the knowledge gain of the individual student, but in the change in the college's "students in general." Baird (1988) suggested twenty points during the college experience where assessment data was needed. These points ranged from pre-college characteristics to career placement and graduate/professional school. Halpern (1987) believes that measurement of net gains of students is a much better

assessment of a school's educational quality. Assessment needs to make comparisons between where students are at the beginning and where they are at the end. Data for a wide range of students is necessary to obtain a "true" picture of the performance of the college.

What purposes do tests serve?

The primary issue regarding the purpose of assessment seems to rest in one question: are we testing the student or are we testing the institution (or department/unit)? These are two clearly different purposes for assessment and constitute a fundamental question for any state and/or institution that is contemplating an assessment program. The favored purpose for assessment appears to be a formative one which gathers information on the quality of college programs in attaining broadly defined outcomes and in promoting change to improve that quality (Baker, 1986; El-Khawas, 1986). A Secondary, but related purpose appears to be the need to determine whether or not students have the abilities that their degrees are supposed to certify (Harris, 1985). This appears to be the concern of most accrediting agencies.

Harris (1985) points out one of the key dilemmas of assessment programs. He argues for specificity of goals, yet points out that "the more specific your goals, the better it is for instructional clarity and for the conduct of assessment. Yet the greater the specificity, the greater the difficulty in reaching campus or departmental consensus (p. 13)." The wide range of assessment types also confuses assessment purposes. Possible outcomes to be tested include knowledge outcomes (general as well as specific), skills outcomes (basic, higher-order cognitive, knowledge building, occupation), attitudes and values outcomes, and behavioral outcomes. All these purposes can be important but a single program cannot assess them all (Ewell, 1987). This is clearly an important decision point facing administrators.

What types of tests are used/proposed?

A 1987 survey by Boyer and others examined how the states were addressing the assessment issue. The survey indicated that there were a number of different trends.

Statewide testing programs. Several states (FL, GA, SD, NJ, TN) mandated statewide testing programs. Other states focused their attention on testing teacher with some

states concentrating upon early intervention at the junior or senior high levels to overcome later problems. Fifteen states were requiring that institutions develop their own approaches to assessment. Several other states were using existing mechanisms to encourage assessment efforts or were monitoring outcomes such as retention and graduation rates.

Commercial Standardized Testing Programs. The most common standardized tests were the ACT/COMP, the GRE, and the NTE. Hanford (1986) warned these professional examinations are designed to assess individuals rather than institutions. He noted that the two standardized measures of institutional effectiveness were the ACT/COMP and the ETS Undergraduate Assessment Program (including Academic Profile II, Education Assessment Series, Program Self Assessment Services, and Major Field Achievement Tests). According to Hartle (1985), 250 colleges and universities are using the ACT/COMP. The longer version includes speaking and listening components. The ETS program seems less well known.

College Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), developed by ACT in 1988, was developed in response to requests for institutions of higher learning throughout the US that see a need for a midpoint collegiate standardized exam covering general education skills including reading, writing, mathematics, and critical thinking.

Academic Profile II, a new assessment service sponsored by the College Board and ETS, was piloted in 1987-88. It is designed to measure academic skills (college level reading, writing, critical thinking, and mathematical data) in the context of three major discipline groups (humanities, social sciences, and natural science.)

State developed Standardized Tests. Several states have also developed their own set of standardized tests for use within their own institutions. In these instances, testing usually occurs when students enter the institution and is largely used for diagnostic and placement purposes. The College Board's Multiple Assessment Programs and Services (MAPS) includes the verbal and mathematical components of the New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test. Variations of this test are used in Florida, Tennessee, and the California Community colleges (Hanford, 1986).

These standardized tests have several advantages and disadvantages. Advantages include: a) high level of technical development, b) contemporary expert view of field, and c) ready and easy to use. Disadvantages include: a) narrow in focus and may not be related to institutional mission, b) questionable student motivation, and c) lack of faculty ownership.

Institution-Specific Programs. A small number of colleges have developed their own institution specific assessment programs. Kings College in Pennsylvania, Alverno College in Wisconsin, and Clayton State College in Georgia have been noted as model assessment programs for their integration of objectives, learning experiences and assessment so that students are provided with feedback throughout their undergraduate studies on the development of their abilities. Northeast Missouri State University students are required to take either the ACT freshman college entrance exam or the ACT college outcome measure project test before entering college and again during their sophomore year in order to measure the progress of each student and determine the effectiveness of the educational experience. Graduating seniors must take an exit exam, typically the GRE in their major field of study to ensure that they compare favorably to the national norms and to determine what changes need to be made in the curriculum. The value-added program is rounded out by "quality of life" surveys and post-graduation follow-ups (Jaschik, 1985).

Other nonobtrusive measures which have been used for assessment purposes include retention studies and alumni surveys.

What are some of the issues involved in using these tests?

The primary issue appears to be conflicting goals for assessment. Basically, goals of colleges are usually incompatible with goals of state legislatures. Campus people favor using assessment for internal purposes such as campus management, instructional improvements, student feedback, etc. Results take time to compile and would not usually be comparable to other schools. States want aggregated and structured assessment so that schools can be compared and they want the results relatively quickly.

A related issue concerns the use of the results of an assessment program. Assessment results could easily be used to compare institutions, departments, and

even faculty performance. It seems that when the purposes for assessment were not clearly specified ahead of time, there was some discomfort expressed in implementing assessment programs (Manning, 1986; Baker, 1986, Thomas, 1987).

Another concern was the potential insensitivity of standardized tests to the diversity in colleges/universities and that the test might ultimately define the curriculum (Casque, 1986). Student motivation for completing standardized measures was also questioned as was cultural and gender bias and the overall effectiveness of measuring higher order abilities in a multiple choice format. (Reynolds, 1986; Casque, 1986).
A final issue focuses on the typical limited resources faced by most colleges and universities. A lack of time, money, and technology may hamper effective outcomes assessment. Some fear that the emphasis on assessment might divert resources from other areas (Westling, 1988) or may have a negative effect on the national commitment to access and equity as well as excellence.

<u>As a Speech Communication administrator and/or faculty member, what are some points I should consider</u>?

Each communication department around the country will probably be faced with the assessment issue in one form or another. Following are some points/ideas that might be considered when contemplating participation in an assessment program. First, a positive and productive attitude is necessary. The assessment movement is here to stay. This situation might be viewed with fear and loathing. On the other hand, one might view this as an opportunity to improve one's program, to find out what students are really learning, and to clarify curriculum. The message appears to be "if you don't do it, someone will do it for you." When viewed as an internal opportunity rather than an external imperative, the outcome is likely to be far more beneficial.

A good starting point is the consideration of management in the goal/mission statements for the department and institution. (In some cases it may be necessary to develop them.) If the institution requires a communication course for all undergraduates, what are the expectations for this course? If the department offers a communication major, what are the expectations for these students? What knowledge/skill should each student possess upon graduation? It is difficult to design

any assessment procedures without a clear statement of anticipated outcomes. What are the institutional and departmental objectives for students who complete communication courses? the communication major? In addition to determining the goals which assessment is to serve, it is also necessary to consider the purpose of assessment. Do you wish to test the learning of individual students or the department's programs? How is comparison data going to be developed? Do the results need to serve more than one purpose? Should student files include knowledge/skill progress information? Should students be required to demonstrate proficiency at various points during their study? Should the department develop both lines of assessment (student and departmental)?

In considering college wide assessment programs, the special nature of speech communication instruction must be carefully considered. Assessment formats appropriate in other disciplines are not entirely suitable to our field. It is, therefore, essential that representatives from communication departments be actively involved in planning college assessment programs.

Department chairs should acquaint themselves with the various standardized measures which they might choose or which might be chosen for them. See the earlier discussion of test types in this article for the most frequently used tests. Speech communication needs to rely on performance tests. Rubin (1985) has developed the Communication Competency Assessment Instrument. Stiggins, Backlund, & Brdigeford (1985) discuss types of performance testing in communication.

At the core, a department chair is faced with a daunting task. Successful programs seem capitalize on existing information, create a visible center for assessment activity, experiment with pilot programs, discover and critically evaluate existing model programs, and use the results in identifiable ways.

Professionals in speech communication have been skilled practitioners of assessment for centuries. We need to, and will, apply those skills to assessment programs that go beyond the assessment of student performance in the classroom. We will begin to more systematically evaluate the quality of our programs and, subsequently, the quality of the discipline.

Conclusion

Adelman (1985) makes three points on the task in front of us. First, now is the time for serious study of assessment in higher education. The intent of such study would not be to learn about assessment as an end to itself, rather, to learn how to use assessment to improve curriculum and instruction. We, professionals in speech communication, should be doing this--legislative mandate or no. Second, it is also a time for critical analysis, not blind enthusiasm or deaf rejection. It is also not the time to eagerly emulate Northeast Missouri State or Alverno College. These models work, but may not work for you. Third, Adelman states "...(we) owe it to each other to drop the polemics and get to work (p. 80)."

Faculty experience demonstrates that, once convinced of its utility, faculty will not only actively endorse assessment but will use and sustain it as a vital part of academic discourse. Then institutions will be free to actually improve instruction, not just document it.

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